

ON ESTRANGEMENT AND HUMAN IMPOTENCE:  
PAUL TILLICH AND SAID NURSI IN CONVERSATION

by

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## ABSTRACT

The Islamic faith considers human impotence, spiritual poverty and weakness as characteristics of the human nature. This paper will try to cover following questions: What is the contemporary comprehension of those within the writings of the contemporary Muslim theologian Said Nursi? What is the main wisdom and consequence of those features? How do human beings have to deal with them? Said Nursi's magnum opus *Risale-i Nur* will function as a resource for analyzing this topic. This work takes also a comparative approach by looking at to what extent Paul Tillich's description of "estrangement" resembles Nursi's understanding of those anthropological elements. Tillich's depiction of estrangement bears significant meaning for Christian theology in the modern age. As a Protestant theologian he believes that estrangement is the natural outcome of the transition from essence to existence.

Nursi as the Muslim counterpart, instead, thinks that human impotence stood in the very beginning. It is a God-given and created feature which will remain until death, unlike estrangement which Tillich regards as consequence or result of a certain human act. He takes the Genesis story into account and sharpens his idea with this biblical narration. This paper will demonstrate that these two figures have some agreement regarding human impotence and estrangement but also differ in some significant ways.

For my beloved parents  
Ímran and Sürethan Salim

“It is ALLAH Who created you from a weak substance, then gave you strength after weakness, then after strength weakness and grey hair. He creates what He pleases and He is the All-Knowing, All-Powerful.” Qur’an 30:54

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## INTRODUCTION

Doubtlessly, human beings consider themselves as the most intelligent creatures. That does not mean though that they are the strongest beings in the universe. On the contrary, impotence is something which human beings sense very often in their lives. It is a significant feature in their very nature. How often does it happen that someone wants to change something, but is unable to do so? Human beings become ill but mostly are not able to influence the disease. The pain cannot be stopped immediately, even if someone takes medicine. The “language” of the virus and so many other diseases is unknown and hidden to each individual. People are weak and impotent to change the conditions of their beloved ones who suffer spiritual or physical pain. Additionally, humanity connects every human being to each other and to the creation as such. One cares about others and shares their concerns and sorrows.

Human beings suffer calamities around the world. News about natural disasters, wars and other negative incidents involve each person in other humans’ lives. Mostly, everyone seeks for ways to make changes but is not able to influence those conditions. It is the reality of impotence and weakness which hinders every individual. Establishing pure justice and happiness often fails because of physical and spiritual weakness.

What is the essence of impotence and how humanity has to deal with it? For what reasons did God establish this characteristic in the human nature? Is there a possibility of eliminating it or will it belong to human nature until the end of time? Is humankind able to transform it into a positive force? The present work is an attempt to approach these questions through the lenses of the contemporary Muslim theologian Said Nursi and will

take Paul Tillich's portrayal of "estrangement" into account. To what extent do commonalities exist between the concepts of estrangement and human impotence (*acz*)?

Christian and Muslim theologians believe that human impotence keeps human beings cognizant of their need for God and thus functions as a significant tool in the vitality of God-awareness. Individuals have a deep lack and a huge absence at the central part of their existence, a lack that discomforts and torments them. It is that can influence them beneficially to seek, recall and confess the reliance on God; however, once this spiritual poverty is acknowledged Islamic and Christian theologies part ways. In Islamic anthropology, this is a structural feature of human nature – not a flaw – just part of what human beings are and always have been and always will be. It is basically equivalent to saying that they are creatures. Creatures do not sustain themselves in existence – they depend in every moment upon the Creator.

In Christian anthropology, this feature of *creatureliness* is also acknowledged, but the difficulty people have in transforming it into God-consciousness is seen as something more, as evidence of original sin, of the shattering of the image of God impressed upon human nature, and therefore tragic.

With respect to that, my work focuses mainly on the Protestant view of this topic and does not cover the Catholic perspective. Certainly, there are other insights, additional thoughts or disagreements which can be presented at a later time in a more detailed work. I will start with short biographies on the two theologians and then concentrate on the relevant text passages in the single works.

## CHAPTER I

### BRIEF BACKGROUND ON THE THEOLOGIANS

#### **1. Paul Tillich: Life and Work**

Paul Johannes Tillich belongs along with Karl Barth, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, Rudolf Bultmann and Karl Rahner as the most significant and greatest German theologians of the twentieth century. With his immigration to the USA in 1933 and his work at the Union Theological Seminary and at the universities of Harvard and Chicago he gained a worldwide reputation. This can be clearly recognized from the wide range of secondary literature on his thought.

Tillich was born on the August 20, 1886 in Starzeddel, Germany.<sup>1</sup> He grew up as a son of a Lutheran pastor.<sup>2</sup> Theology and Philosophy were the areas he studied in Berlin, Tübingen and Halle.<sup>3</sup> During this time he joined the Wingolf society, which was a religious fellowship community.<sup>4</sup> 1919 he completed his doctoral work in Philosophy at the University of Breslau with a dissertation on Friedrich Wilhelm Joseph Schelling.<sup>5</sup> He received his ordination and worked as a priest. Later on, he joined voluntarily the military in order to serve as a chaplain. The cruelties and terror of the war influenced Tillich strongly.<sup>6</sup> After World War I, he taught as Professor of Theology at the University of Berlin; 1924 in Marburg, 1925 in Dresden, in Leipzig and finally from 1929 until 1933 at the University in Frankfurt. In Marburg he began to develop his systematic theology by

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm and Marion Pauck, *Paul Tillich: His Life & Thought*, vol. 1 (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1976), 1.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>4</sup> John Heywood Thomas, *Paul Tillich* (New York: Continuum, 2000), 4.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

teaching a seminar on it. He met Martin Heidegger who deeply impressed him by his thoughts.<sup>7</sup>

During his stay in Frankfurt he started to give public lectures and speeches in which he criticized the Nazi regime.<sup>8</sup> Due to his critique which he expressed in a written work he was dismissed from his position.<sup>9</sup> Reinhold Niebuhr was very much impressed by Tillich's work and encouraged him to join the faculty of the Union Theological Seminary in New York. He received the offer in summer 1933 when Niebuhr visited Germany. Tillich did agree and moved to America at the age of 47.<sup>10</sup>

He remained at the Seminary for almost twenty years and began as visiting professor of Philosophy of Religion. Tillich was also visiting lecturer at Columbia University during that time. In America he received the opportunity to get in touch with numerous philosophers. For that reason he became member of several circles like *The Theological Discussion Group*, *American Theological Society* and *Philosophy Club*.

By the end of World War II, he was already famous in the world of academia and was familiar with the English language to the extent that he was able to publish his writings in scientific journals. Although he became an American citizen in 1940 he was very much engaged in many exile organizations such as the *Council for a Democratic Germany* and thus highly active in the political sphere.<sup>11</sup> It was founded in 1944 and Tillich became chairman of the board.

While working in New York he wrote and published a series of works which found wide acclaim. Among those publications are: *On the Boundary* (1936), *The Protestant Era* (1948), *The Shaking of Foundations* (1948) and many more.<sup>12</sup> However, his magnum opus was his *Systematic Theology* which he started to write in the early 1950's. In 1955 he

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 19.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 21.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 22.

received a position at Harvard Divinity School and published the second volume of his *Systematic Theology*. He completed this masterpiece at the University of Chicago where he started in 1962. Paul Tillich died October 22, 1965 in Chicago.<sup>13</sup>

## **2. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi: Life and Work**<sup>14</sup>

Said Nursi was born in the village of Nurs near the city of Bitlis in Eastern Turkey in 1877. He was the fourth child of his family. Until the age of nine he was educated by his older brother. Afterwards he completed the entire theological education in the classical school system, the so-called *madrassa*. In 1893 he traveled to Cizre in order to end up the wars among the different clans; hence, he saved thousands of people who stood against each other. After his visit of Mardin in 1894 where no one was able to defeat him in the theological disputes he was thrown out of the city. The scholars could not stand Nursi who was more knowledgeable than they.

Thereupon, Nursi followed an invitation of the governor of Bitlis and continued his scholarly work. The governor of Van, Hasan Pasha, invited him to stay with him. He accepted and remained in Van for ten years. During this period he elaborated the complete studies of modern sciences and advanced his thoughts. His first reformist idea was to provide modern sciences for theologians and religion for scientists. Thus, he wanted to go against the unethical materialism and ignorance of scholars. The Horhor madrasa in Van was the first school where he put his concept into action. He taught modern sciences in combination with Islamic theology. According to Nursi, it was necessary to establish a

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 26.

<sup>14</sup> Much of the following account has been summarized from Şükran Vahide, *Islam in Modern Turkey: An Intellectual Biography of Bediüzzaman Said Nursi* (New York: State University of New York Press, 2005)

university in Eastern Turkey in order to advance the region. His vision was an institution which teaches classical Islamic thought in combination with modern sciences.

Tahir Pasha, successor of Hasan Pasha, was impressed by his visions and convinced him to travel to Istanbul and try to get some support for the realization of his project. In 1907 Nursi followed his advice and went to Istanbul. The ruling Ottoman government at that time was not willing to help him. Due to his intelligence and knowledge he gained high reputation and admiration in Istanbul within a short time. Upon proclamation of the Parliamentary system, Nursi decided to support it since he thought the new system was in conformity with sharia.

In 1908 he published several articles in newspapers and journals. His writings mostly concerned the improvements of the desolate state of the country, educational reforms and the unity of the nation. Upon the Thirty-first of March incident which was a reactionary revolt of soldiers against the government and in which Nursi played no part, he became imprisoned and came for a trial. On the contrary, as far as he could he used his influence and reputation to preserve the order. He was released, and in 1910 he went back to Eastern Anatolia and informed its people about the new constitutional system. From now on, he tried to publish his books. In 1911 he traveled to Syria and held a lecture in front of a huge audience in the famous Umayyad mosque in Damascus. The Damascus Sermon analyzed the hopeless condition of the Islamic world and proposed ideas to solve those issues.

In 1912/1913 Nursi began to build the university in Eastern Anatolia. However, with the beginning of World War I he was unable to realize his project. He also prevented revolts in the Eastern part among the different tribes. Said Nursi joined the militia and became commander of a unit. It was at that time that he completed his first Qur'an commentary *Işaratül I'caz*, working while he was at the front. Between 1916 and 1918 he was imprisoned in Russia but was able to escape over Berlin to Istanbul. Upon his arrival in Istanbul he became a member of the *Dar al Hikmah al Islamiyya*, the highest council

for religious affairs. He was honored by Sultan Wahiduddin for his service as a Muslim scholar. From that time on, he dedicated his life to his works again and fought against the British and allies. Nursi was also concerned about the nationalist movements and their publications. In 1922 the new government invited him to Ankara. Despite the disagreements among the members of the parliament he achieved their consent for his project in Anatolia which, unfortunately, he could not complete. Shaykh Said asked Said Nursi for his support for a revolution against the new government. Nursi refused and called the population to remain peacefully. All influential thinkers including Nursi and clan leaders were banned after this revolt. His first place of exile was Burdur, then Barla.

Between 1926 and 1934 he wrote his magnum opus, the *Risale-i Nur*. Said Nursi committed himself to enlightenment of the population. In 1935 a series of trials started accusing him of promoting religion. Again, he was sent to exile and imprisoned for many years. In the time, from 1946 to 1950, he supported the Democrats and a process for a multi-party system. Said Nursi died in March 23, 1960 in Urfa. His grave was moved by the military to an unknown place for ensuring that he would be forgotten.

## CHAPTER II

### ON ESTRANGEMENT AND HUMAN IMPOTENCE: PAUL TILLICH AND SAID NURSI IN CONVERSATION

#### **1. Paul Tillich on Estrangement**

In his *Systematic Theology* Paul Tillich regards sin as estrangement.<sup>15</sup> There are different manifestations of it which all testify to impotence and spiritual poverty. They harden the hearts of human beings toward God. The story of the Fall, which is a significant part of the Christian faith, has universal anthropological importance.<sup>16</sup> In that sense, Tillich criticizes biblical literalism which interprets the Fall as an event which happened once upon a time while putting aside its meaning for the human situation in general. Theology should not take literalism into account; however, it had a deep impact on the Christian church. With respect to that, he uses the phrase “transition from essence to existence” in order to explain his concept of the demythologization of the myth of the Fall.<sup>17</sup>

Tillich regards the Genesis story as the richest and most profound expression of humankind’s awareness of existential estrangement. It also exemplifies how the transition from essence to existence takes place.<sup>18</sup> Firstly, it shows the possibility of the Fall. It discloses then the motives, the event itself and finally the consequences.

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<sup>15</sup> Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol.2 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1957), 31.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 31.

As opposed to other creatures, human beings have finite freedom which makes the transition from essence to existence possible.<sup>19</sup> Tillich says finite because their freedom is relative. They can create imaginary structures above the real ones to which they are bound like all beings. Finally, humans are even free from their freedom. They can give up their humanity and thus go against their very nature. They can Fall which Calvin regarded as weakness itself.<sup>20</sup> It is the image of God in man which gives humans the possibility of the Fall;<sup>21</sup> hence, they have ability to fall apart from God. As Tillich puts it, the glory of human beings and their weakness are identical. One cannot be removed without removing the other. Without these characteristics individuals would not be able to serve God, either in salvation or in condemnation. The main force which drives man toward transition from essence to existence is anxiety.<sup>22</sup> Human beings are aware of being finite and this awareness is called anxiety.<sup>23</sup>

Before committing the well-known sin human beings were in a state of “dreaming innocence.”<sup>24</sup> It is the moment in which freedom and divine destiny are in harmony, but neither of them is actualized. It is instant when finite freedom becomes conscious of itself and tends to become actual. Finally, the first human being decided to actualize freedom:

He stands between the preservation of his dreaming innocence without experiencing the actuality of being and the loss of his innocence through knowledge, power and guilt. The anxiety of this situation is the state of temptation. Man decides for self-actualization, thus producing the end of dreaming innocence.<sup>25</sup>

In Tillich’s view, this theological fact is manifest in every human being.<sup>26</sup> This event is unique because of its psychological and religious impact.<sup>27</sup> The entire description of the

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 32.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid., 33.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 34.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 35.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 36.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 37.

Genesis story comes from the daily experience of people living under certain social and cultural dynamics. It is not, therefore, an event which happened a long time ago. Instead, it has universal legitimacy. Other elements, such as the serpent, have significant meaning as well. The serpent depicts the vigorous trends of nature and the two trees have magical character. One can also clearly recognize the rise of sexual consciousness. The narration describes the struggle of the divine with demonic powers. Tillich holds the opinion that the individual act of existential estrangement is not the isolated act of an isolated individual.<sup>28</sup> It is an incident which happens in the daily lives of people. Every individual who makes an ethical decision finds him or herself between an act of individual freedom and of universal destiny. Existence, as Tillich puts it, is rooted both in ethical freedom and in tragic destiny. Denying one or the other component makes the human situation incomprehensible. Uniting them is the important issue of the doctrine of man.

The reason why the doctrine of original sin was denied by modernists in the past was the negative evaluation of human beings in that context.<sup>29</sup> People feared that the unfavorable view of individuals in that respect would lead to pessimism in times of modernity, industrialism and new inventions in the social and political realm. Tillich emphasizes the importance of showing the positive valuation of humans in their fundamental nature. Theology, therefore, must join classical humanism in order to protect humans' goodness against naturalistic and existentialistic denial of their greatness and dignity.<sup>30</sup> At the same time the matter of self-estrangement has to be shown. All in all, this would lead to a balanced view on the doctrine of man.<sup>31</sup> In that respect, an elimination of terms like "original or hereditary sin" might be considered. They can be substituted by a mutual penetration of moral and tragic elements in the human situation. Analytic psychology, as well as analytic sociology, has shown how destiny and freedom, tragedy

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 39.

and responsibility, are intertwined with each other in every individual since early childhood. It is the human being who takes the responsibility from the transition of essence into existence. Tillich explains the figures in the Genesis story very symbolically. The angelic and demonic powers which take part in the narration are “supra-individual structures of goodness and supra-individual structures of evil.”<sup>32</sup> Consequently, angels and demons are mythological terms for constructive and destructive powers of being which are apparent in each individual, in every social group and in the same historical situation. For Tillich, they are not beings but rather powers of being.

The individual, therefore, is fully responsible for the transition from essence to existence since all powers can be found within him or her, and he or she has the ability and freedom to rule over them.<sup>33</sup> Nevertheless, the idea of full responsibility includes the fact that one is able to “respond.” As Tillich says, there are many conditions, such as tiredness, sickness, intoxication, neurotic compulsion and psychotic splits, which decrease this responsibility.<sup>34</sup> Those do not eliminate responsibility but prove the existence of destiny in every act of freedom; furthermore, the self is not only bound to that but also to the influences of its social environment.

As a matter of fact, saying that an individual is completely independent is not quite accurate. The creation works through human beings as part of the universe since biological, psychological and sociological powers come into play in the individual. When human beings finally come from essence to existence they end in the state of estrangement.<sup>35</sup> They are not only estranged in the ground of their being, but also from other beings and from themselves. The result is personal guilt and universal tragedy as Tillich claims. He gives a description of existential estrangement and its self-destructive

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 42.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 44.

implications. Estrangement depicts the essential feature of humans' predicament.<sup>36</sup>

According to Tillich, the way individuals exist is not what they are and ought to be. In his view, human beings belong to that from which they are estranged; furthermore, their enmity towards the Creator is evidence enough that they belong to Him. "Where there is the possibility of hate, there and there alone is the possibility of love," as Tillich puts it.<sup>37</sup>

Although estrangement does not appear in the Bible as a term, it points to human beings' predicament through the biblical descriptions or symbols.

For instance, the expulsion from paradise, the enmity between humankind and nature, the hostility between brother and brother, the estrangement of nation from nation through the confusion of language, the complaints of the prophets against their kings and human beings who turn to alien gods exemplify the concept of estrangement.<sup>38</sup> Using the term "estrangement" in a biblical sense, therefore, would be appropriate to describe humankind's existential situation.<sup>39</sup> Still, estrangement does not replace "sin." Tillich uses this term in order to express what is not implied in the meaning of estrangement and also to reinterpret the concept of sin. With respect to that, sin describes the personal character of estrangement over against its tragic side. It also points to personal freedom and guilt in contrast to tragic guilt and the universal destiny of estrangement. For Tillich, humans' predicament is estrangement, but the estrangement is sin. Sins are the expressions of sin and an act is sinful because it is an expression of estrangement from God, from other human beings and from oneself.<sup>40</sup> Love is the element which is used to reunite with God and stands, therefore, in contrast to estrangement. When faith and love come together, sin is defeated since estrangement is overcome by reunion, as Tillich puts it.

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 45.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 46.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 47.

## **Estrangement as Unbelief**

Tillich agrees with the definition of the Augsburg Confession which conceptualized sin as a state of unbelief and concupiscence.<sup>41</sup> He adds another component to this definition of estrangement, namely *hubris*, the sin of pride or self-elevation. For a further clarification Tillich explains those three elements. By unbelief humans turn to themselves and lose their fundamental union with their being and world. They deny their relationship with God through their freedom and do not participate any longer with Him. Nevertheless, this entire behavior is not the denial of God. Unbelief is the expression of the disconnection of one's will from the will of God.

In the state of estrangement, human beings are outside of the Divine which they actually belong to. The individual takes him or herself as the center since he or she is the only being with self-consciousness.<sup>42</sup> It is this very centrality of the human's self which gives him or her greatness, dignity, and being the "image of God." Humankind has the ability to transcend itself and its world. Human beings' perfection lies in the fact that they have a self and a world; nevertheless, this perfection is also their temptation. They start to think about their potential infinity and freedom. Like other creatures humans have certain boundaries; unlike them, they have an awareness of their finitude.

## **Estrangement as Hubris**

The very moment a human being denies the fact that he or she is excluded from divine infinity he or she falls into *hubris*.<sup>43</sup> It is the attempt of human beings to elevate themselves into the divine realm. Indeed, they have the capability to do so because of their greatness. Hubris cannot be translated as pride since pride is a moral quality which hubris is not. Moreover, hubris is universal and can be found in acts of humility and pride.

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 49.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 50.

Tillich goes with the term “self-elevation” for hubris. When people tend to declare their finite goodness as absolute goodness or identify partial truth as absolute truth they start to commit the “spiritual sin” which is hubris.<sup>44</sup> In that sense, hubris appears in acts of goodness and of evil, as previously mentioned. The individual proclaims his or her cultural creativity with divine creativity and gives infinite significance to the cultural inventions. Consequently, the self-elevation of groups happens through the self-elevation of individuals. They strive to resemble God and they behave according to this desire in self-affirmation and self-evaluation. Humankind is not eager to admit its finitude, faults, weakness, ignorance, insecurity, loneliness and its anxiety, as Tillich states.<sup>45</sup> If human beings were willing to acknowledge those, they would make another instrument of hubris out of this declaration.

First, the human being displaces him or herself from the divine center through unbelief and then places his or her own personality in the middle of existence and of the world. The reason why the individual is tempted to follow this path is the desire to draw the whole of his or her world into the self.<sup>46</sup> This makes the individual universal. The human being longs for reunion with the whole. The poverty makes him or her seek for abundance.

### **Estrangement as Concupiscence**

With respect to that, Tillich starts with a new interpretation of *concupiscence* which was erroneously limited by medieval theologians to the explanation of sexual desire. Concupiscence is the desire of humans for the reunion with the whole. This is the root of love in all its forms. He or she wants to achieve infinite abundance. Concupiscence draws to all kinds of aspects which are related to humans’ self. Regarding this, physical hunger,

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 52.

for instance, sex, knowledge, power and material wealth as well as spiritual richness have significance for humans' lives. Striving for all of these seems to be an attempt to pull the world into one's own self; this is the matter of concupiscence.<sup>47</sup> While discussing concupiscence Tillich refers to *libido*, the unlimited desire of humans to get rid of their biological, particularly their sexual, tensions and to receive joy from the discharge of those. A sign of the estrangement of human beings is the infiniteness of libido.<sup>48</sup> This feature stands in contrast to the fundamental or created goodness of humankind. Neither libido nor the will to power are features of concupiscence.<sup>49</sup> They turn into manifestations of concupiscence and estrangement when they are not united with love and thus do not have a clear object.

### **Estrangement as Fact and Act**

Although the description of the Genesis story was explained differently by classical theology the result was generally accepted.<sup>50</sup> It saw humankind as being in a state of estrangement; hence, humanity's destiny is to live with sin, a universal destiny. Tillich believes that original sin is neither original nor hereditary. The biblical narration points to the universal destiny of estrangement which is the concern of every human being. A person who sins actualizes the universal fact of estrangement since sin is already existent. Human freedom, responsibility and guilt are inserted in the universal destiny of estrangement in such a way that they actualize it through all free acts. Sin as fact and sin as act are intertwined with each other. Tillich points out that estrangement has been explained physically, by a mechanistic determinism; biologically, by theories of the decadence of the biological power of life; psychologically, as the compulsory force of the unconscious; sociologically, as the result of class domination; culturally, as the lack of

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 53.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 54.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., 56.

educational adjustment.<sup>51</sup> None of these descriptions depict the feeling of personal responsibility which the individual has for the acts in the state of estrangement. These previous mentioned explanations highlight the element of destiny in the human predicament.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, humans still have their characteristics of finite freedom and responsibility which cannot be eliminated. The concept of estrangement does not deny the consciousness of guilt which is existent in human nature.

### **Estrangement Individually and Collectively**

Tillich makes very clear what estrangement means in the individual realm. With respect to that, he explains terms like freedom and destiny, responsibility, guilt and possible reconciliation. After depicting the meaning of estrangement for the individual, he refers to the consequences of it in the collective sphere.<sup>53</sup> Personal and individual guilt affect the collectivity at the same time. Entire nations have to confess to the crime of their rulers even though there might be some individuals who did not participate in that sin. Unlike the person, social groups do not have a decisive pole but are power structures of those persons. A number of individuals determine the activities of all other individuals who belong to this group.<sup>54</sup> With regard to that, conflicts happen within the group since not all individuals identify themselves with the actions or decisions of the ruling party. The group, therefore, is neither estranged nor reconciled. Consequently, collective guilt is missing. The universal destiny of humankind exists, which in a special group, becomes special destiny without ceasing to be universal. Every individual participates in this destiny, as Tillich claims. Destiny in that sense is interwoven with freedom. As long as a person does not commit a crime he or she is not responsible. Tillich gives the following example of how freedom and destiny unite in the collective sphere:

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 57.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid., 58.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 59.

The citizens of a city are not guilty of the crimes committed in their city; but they are guilty as participants in the destiny of man as a whole and in the destiny of their city in particular; for their acts in which freedom was united with destiny have contributed to the destiny in which they participate.<sup>55</sup>

They are not accused by performing this crime but contributing to the destiny in which these bad acts happened.<sup>56</sup> Tillich includes also the victims in this guilt since the destiny of falling under the power of tyranny is part of the universal destiny.

### **Self – Loss and World – Loss in the State of Estrangement**

Human beings are in a condition of existential estrangement, unbelief, hubris and concupiscence. The estranged state of an individual stands in contrast to his or her essential being and his or her capacity for goodness.<sup>57</sup> It is this very self-contradiction which brings a human being to self-destruction; however, demonic or divine powers do not interfere and do not play a role in this. It is the result of estrangement itself which leads to destruction. Tillich calls this the “structure of destruction,” by which he means that it has no independent standing in the whole of reality, but is, instead, dependent upon the structure of that in and upon which it acts destructively. Human beings are free to make their world an object which they behold and they are free to make themselves objects upon which they look. Through their finitude they are able to lose themselves and their world. This is the basic “structure of destruction.” In that context the term “evil” includes both destruction and estrangement.

Tillich goes on with the chapter about the conflicts in the ontological polarities in the state of estrangement. In his view, the interdependence of self-loss and world-loss in the state of estrangement is manifest in the interdependent loss of the polar elements of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 59.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 60.

being.<sup>58</sup> The two components of freedom and destiny are not in conflict but in tension in the state of “dreaming innocence.” Hubris and concupiscence drive human freedom to end its relation to the objects which are provided by destiny. It starts to get in touch with an indistinct number of contents.<sup>59</sup> Freedom loses its definiteness if a human being declares him or herself the center of the universe. He or she turns toward objects, persons and things which are entirely contingent upon the selected subject and which can be replaced by others of the same contingency and ultimate unrelatedness.

Freedom falls under the rule of powers which move against each other without a deciding center when it is not directed by destiny. Inward and outward influences place conditions on what seemed to be free. Some sections of the self come into play and influence the center and affect it without joining the other parts. Under the influence of hubris and concupiscence a human is driven in all directions without any clear goal and substance.

### **Finitude and Estrangement**

Human beings are dominated by death and by the anxiety of dying.<sup>60</sup> One is determined by finitude and estranged from the supreme power of being. The existence comes out of nothing and the return is to nothing as well. By referring to the Genesis account Tillich makes clear that as long as humans participate in the eternal they remain eternal while separation from it takes them to their natural finitude.<sup>61</sup> In the state of estrangement individuals are left to the finite nature of having to die. According to Tillich’s understanding, sin does not cause death but empowers it. In regard to this, he rejects the idea that the Fall transformed the cellular or psychological form of human beings.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid., 62.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 66.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 67.

The anxiety of non-existence is apparent in every finite being, in the condition of dreaming innocence and in “the contested and decided unity with God as expressed in the picture of Jesus as the Christ.”<sup>62</sup> In that context, the anxiety of Jesus’ death points to the universal character of the connection between finitude and anxiety. The reason why a person tries to get rid of him or herself is the anxiety about death.<sup>63</sup> In order to escape death the individual attempts to annihilate him or herself. Death, therefore, is considered as evil and belongs to the structure of destruction; thus, one can speak of a transformation of essential finitude into existential evil. Humankind tries to resist time because of the fact that they essentially belong to eternity. They are excluded from eternity through their state of estrangement and their desire to transform finite moments into infinite ones.<sup>64</sup> The individual is not willing to accept his or her finiteness and thus considers time as a demonic structure.

### **Estrangement, Suffering and Loneliness**

Among others, suffering and loneliness are the consequences of the state of human estrangement. While the former concerns the individual directly the latter stands in relation to other human beings.<sup>65</sup> Nevertheless, those two are interwoven with each other. Suffering is a part of finitude, as Tillich believes. In the condition of existence, humankind is cut off from blessedness and suffering lays hold of it in a ruinous way; hence, suffering becomes a structure of destruction and therefore evil. Tillich distinguishes between meaningful and meaningless suffering. The first category calls for protection and healing in the being which is assaulted by pain.<sup>66</sup> This kind of meaningful suffering can also disclose both the potential and the limitation of that individual. This all

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>65</sup> Ibid., 70.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid., 71.

depends on the objective character of suffering and on the way in which it is taken by the suffering person. As an example of meaningless suffering, Tillich describes the attempt to overcome the “aloneness” through union with other beings and the hostility which results from the rejection of this desire. Tillich determines essential and existential structures of “aloneness.” Due to his or her centered self, the individual is cut off from the whole of reality which is not identified with him or herself. The more he or she becomes aware of his or her own world the more he or she is conscious of him or herself.

Love is the inner force which drives human beings to involvement with their worlds; however, this participation is limited by finitude. Loneliness is a manifestation of humans’ entire centeredness and can also be expressed as “solitude.” Tillich believes that solitude enables us to have communion. He regards solitude as the way to experience the realm of the ultimate as the real foundation for communion among those who are alone. In the state of existential estrangement the individual is cut off from the ultimate and left alone in loneliness.<sup>67</sup> He or she, however, cannot stand this loneliness and surrenders the lonely self to the collective. Since the other individuals are also condemned to this loneliness they are not able to have communion because they are unable to have solitude. The individual starts to become hostile against his or her own self and against those who reject him or her. The result is a distortion of the essential structure of solitude and communion into a source of suffering by existential estrangement. Those two components, destruction of others and self-destruction, are intertwined with each other. Another element of finitude is doubt which belongs to the essential being and to the state of dreaming innocence. Tillich refers to the serpent in the Genesis account as symbolizing this doubt. Essential doubt enables an individual to analyze and control reality to the degree that he or she is willing to use it honestly and sacrificially.<sup>68</sup> Finitude also contains uncertainty which is a

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 73.

manifestation of the general insecurity of a finite being. All kinds of insecurity and uncertainty are part of human beings' essential finitude.

### **The Meaning of Despair**

According to Tillich, the structures of evil as described earlier drive man into the state of "despair."<sup>69</sup> He describes it as follows:

The pain of despair is the agony of being responsible for the loss of the meaning of one's existence and of being unable to recover it. One is shut up in one's self and in the conflict with one's self. One cannot escape, because one cannot escape from one's self. It is out of this situation that the question arises whether suicide may be a way of getting rid of one's self.<sup>70</sup>

According to Tillich's view, all suicidal tensions in every person can be regarded as an expression of human estrangement.<sup>71</sup> The meaning of despair is also included in the symbol of condemnation; "eternal condemnation," so to speak.<sup>72</sup> It basically bears the understanding that people who take part in the divine eternity and in the limitation of finitude have conquered the despair expressed in the experience of condemnation.

## **2. Bediüzzaman Said Nursi on Human Impotence (Acz)**

Before beginning with Nursi's portion on human impotence, it is important to mention that he often tends to use hyperboles or overstatements like good communicators often do. Keeping that in mind will help to get a better comprehension of his rhetoric.

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<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid., 76.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 78.

## The Personal Aspect

Bediüzzaman Said Nursi regards impotence, *acz*, as deeply rooted in human nature.<sup>73</sup> He addresses this issue to his ego, *nafs*, which in its pride is not willing to acknowledge impotence at all. In order to give evidence for the fact of being infinitely weak he reflects on the endless enemies and needs of humans. *Acz* as a fundamental feature of human beings is infinite and will never change until the end of time. Internalizing this as a matter of fact brings humankind closer to God. Since people discover that they are unable to satisfy their needs they will rely upon a power which first of all is the true Owner of the universe (*al-Mâlik*) and the Ruler (*al-Hâkim*) as well. Only then they will be fully able to achieve their demands and eliminate begging in front of creatures and the entire creation.<sup>74</sup> Metaphorically and literally speaking, they do not need to ask other weak creatures for their essential desires.

Impotence, therefore, bears the potentiality of being an intercessor between a person and God. If a servant admits this very infinite impotence he or she is connected immediately to an infinite source of power and mercy.<sup>75</sup> A relationship is built with an All-Powerful (*al-Qadîr*) and All-Merciful (*al-Rahîm*) God. Consequently, human anxiety ultimately disappears and is replaced by a strength which is deeply related to God. God's omnipotence is reflected through human impotence. They are two poles. Nursi refers to the weakest creatures on earth such as fish, worms or infants in order to prove that their provision is given according to their impotence and helplessness and not due to their strength.<sup>76</sup> These are the ones who are nourished in the best way. According to Nursi, it is sufficient to compare fish with foxes or trees with animals. Trees rely entirely on God and declare their impotence. As a result everything receives the divine order to rush for their

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<sup>73</sup> Bediüzzaman Said Nursî, *The Words: On the Nature and Purposes of Man, and All Things*, trans. Şükran Vahide (İstanbul: Sözler Publications, 1992), 16.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 35.

needs. Impotence as a characteristic of human nature is additionally an evidence for the fact that human beings are created for worship and service.<sup>77</sup> It is impotence which leads humankind either consciously or unconsciously to the call and prayer for divine help, mercy and strength.

A human being cannot even reach a bird in terms of satisfying earthly material needs. He or she does not hold the strength to do so; however, a human being defeats all creatures with respect to spiritual life:

Furthermore, man's nature and spiritual faculties show that he is created for worship. For in respect of the power and actions necessary for the life of this world, he cannot compete with the most inferior sparrow. While in respect of knowledge and need, and worship and supplication, which are necessary for spiritual life and the life of the hereafter, he is like the monarch and commander of the animals.<sup>78</sup>

Nursi puts a strong emphasis on human impotence throughout his writings. In the sixth Word he goes on by saying that again human beings are weak and impotent, but life on the other hand is hard and a burden. If they are not able to trust God and depend on him they will suffer endless pain. They will torture their own minds if they do not surrender to God.<sup>79</sup> Furthermore, all these kinds of spiritual torture will remain fruitless and without any benefit. As a second result, humans will always lament under the numerous separations from beings and things they are attached to, but will part away after a certain time. Nursi regards impotence besides weakness as one of the two diseases which afflict humankind.<sup>80</sup> The cure against it is patience and trust in God's power and wisdom. Then, human beings will be rescued from their anxiety towards anything of which they are afraid. Since God is the one who rules according to the Qur'anic verse: "*Creator of the heavens and the earth. When He decrees a thing, He only says to it: 'Be,' and there it*

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 43.

is,<sup>81</sup> He owns infinite power. A person who is a true believer will get pleasure from his or her impotence and the fear of God. Nursi refers to the example of a child who seeks refuge by in mother while realizing its impotence and weakness. For impotence draws the mother's attention to the child and brings the child closer to her. Therefore, all devout believers find true joy and pleasure in their impotence and the fear of God (*hayfullah*). They try to get rid of their own selfish strength and look on impotence as a sort of mediator which pleads for them in front of God.<sup>82</sup>

The act of declaration of this crucial feature of human nature is particularly seen in the obligatory prayer. For through observing his or her ritual prayer the believer acknowledges this impotence and weakness.<sup>83</sup> As Nursi puts it, this is the significance and the meaning of prayer and worship in general. After declaring this impotence one gets a sense of divine mercy, perfection and power and prostrates oneself in astonishment and joy. For Nursi, impotence of human beings has to be mainly understood from a theocentric perspective. He considers it as a tool to comprehend the nature of God and to get closer to Him:

That is to say, just as the sovereignty of Dominicality demands worship and obedience, so also does the holiness of Dominicality require that the servant sees his faults through seeking forgiveness, and through his glorifications and declaring *Glory be to God* proclaims that his Sustainer is pure and free of all defects, and exalted above and far from the false ideas of the people of misguidance, and hallowed and exempt from all the faults in the universe.<sup>84</sup>

Humankind recognizes impotence not only within itself, but also in the entire creation. There are certain contexts of times which make one much more aware of his or her weakness than in any other times. For instance, the noon prayer is the time where one is very busy in daily work. Commitments, mental pressures and stress are on schedule;

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<sup>81</sup> Qur'an 2: 117

<sup>82</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 43

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, 52.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

therefore, it is a time in which one feels impotence and weakness at its peak.<sup>85</sup> In order to rest from these pressures and to be reminded of God's power and majesty, the servant rushes to the noon prayer. The believer will be relieved from all burdens and will seek help from God. By bowing and prostrating in front of God, the believer feels and declares his or her impotence and receives an understanding of His glory and mercy.

Another instance of how impotence comes clearly into focus is during the observation of the evening prayer.<sup>86</sup> The day is coming to an end and the believer is reminded of the fact that he or she will not be able to hold to anything that he or she feels close to or is attached to. While seeking for someone in the creation who can help and answer to this very human impotence, one realizes that everything in the universe is also afflicted by the disease of impotence and weakness. Then, humankind not only admits its own impotence, but also the impotence of the rest of creation. One becomes aware of the fact that God is the only one who is everlasting, not influenced by change and the only one who is able to answer for the call of perfection, strength and mercy. The believer announces God's wonderful attributes and Divine Names (*asma al-Husna*).

Human nature is clearly specified as impotent and weak; hence, God in His mercy, compassion and love towards humankind provided the earth with an infinite number of blessings.<sup>87</sup> God is, in contrast to human beings, extremely powerful and responds to impotence by supplying the planet as a treasure of innumerable material and immaterial gifts. Nursi talks about the different sorts of metals, minerals, food and all kinds of goods. God pleases humankind in a way which is beyond description. Human beings are distressed by the following variety of pain: natural disasters, physical and spiritual diseases, personal sorrows and human calamities around the world. Such things torment them all the time. People are very often unable to change these situations. They cannot

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>87</sup> Nursi, *The Rays Collection* (Istanbul: Sözlük Publications, 2002), 209.

reach those suffering people around the world or establish true justice in societies which struggle with human rights. At this point, the true believer turns to God in full impotence and prays for justice, help and support for the oppressed and a cure for all needs of other human beings.

In the eleventh Word Nursi again refers to human impotence in the context of worship and prayer. He divides humanity into two groups. The first group is characterized as non-believers. The other is described as believers. They confess the impotence within themselves.<sup>88</sup> As a result, they prostrate in humility, love and wonder. While announcing their weakness and dependence on God they offer Him supplications. Nursi goes on by saying that human beings have nine duties. One of them is to comprehend God's power and His wealth with the measure of impotence and weakness.<sup>89</sup> Just like someone who is hungry and understands the degree and variety of taste through the measure of hunger.

In the next chapter, Nursi mentions impotence in the context of a comparison between the education of the Qur'an with the teachings of philosophy and science.<sup>90</sup> A follower of the latter path is a completely arrogant despot, but in his or her impotence he or she is unable to find a place of support. Consequently, the unbeliever obeys everything in which he or she can find profit or advantage. This person worships anything which he can benefit from as a "Lord." Such people aim only to live for satisfying their animalistic needs and to obtain their own interests. In short, this type of person is a self-centered individual and all in all weak, since he or she has to rely upon anything other than God in order to pursue egoistic desires.<sup>91</sup> In contrast to this unbeliever stands the devout believer. This person is also described as having impotence and weakness in his or her very nature; however, those devout people do not degrade themselves in front of anything. Their weakness turns into strength since they depend on God, the Almighty One. They do not

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<sup>88</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 138.

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid.*, 141.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, 145-146.

<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*

look for any benefit on earth and in the hereafter. They even do not seek a place in Paradise. It is sufficient for them to please God.<sup>92</sup>

In the thirteenth Word, Nursi describes a human being as a living machine which can sense a variety of sorrows and pleasures.<sup>93</sup> In spite of its absolute impotence humankind has to face countless enemies such as physical and spiritual pain. Additionally, human beings have numerous needs and desires, outward as well as inward. Furthermore, they experience the pain of death and separation. Nevertheless, it is through faith and worship that one comes into a relationship with God; thus, one is able to find an advocate who can eliminate all the previous mentioned opponents and fulfill the endless desires. Then, the believer becomes proud by establishing such a relationship with God and at the same time holds a special rank. It is through holding this special rank that the believer gets happiness. He or she proves the love towards God by worshipping Him in the prescribed way.<sup>94</sup>

For Nursi, impotence is a feature of change. He believes that it increases tremendously by time.<sup>95</sup> Most probably, he refers to the challenges of time. Modernity and technology make human beings more dependent and therefore needier. God is not in need of creatures who assist Him in His work in the universe. He does not need them as intermediaries.<sup>96</sup> The reason for their existence is to observe and announce His supreme power through their impotence, worship and veneration. Nursi considers creatures as a veil to God's dignity and magnificence. Another human characteristic which is deeply related to impotence is human capability of choice or the power of will.<sup>97</sup> It is short in making decisions and is not able to create whatever was desired. It lacks power and is erroneous.<sup>98</sup>

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid.

<sup>93</sup> Nursi, *The Rays Collection*, 229.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Nursi, *The Words*, 184.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid., 215.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

After the believer admits impotence, God's compassion, help and support will reach him or her.<sup>99</sup> Impotence becomes a source of real strength and an infinite treasure.<sup>100</sup>

The nineteenth Word deals with the significance of the Prophet (pbuh) and how he transformed impotence into a positive feature through his message.<sup>101</sup> Before his appearance human impotence degraded human beings to something less worthy than animals. Since animals do not have a mind, they are not mentally connected with the past or future. They are neither afflicted by spiritual pains when they think of their past or future nor are somehow mentally hurt by that. After the coming of the Prophet this impotence was turned into strength by showing how to rely on God and His power. Human beings turn to become vicegerents on earth. It is because of this deep lack in human nature that people are not able to worship God in the best way.<sup>102</sup> Nevertheless, through repentance and prayer they seek God's mercy in order to ask for acceptance of their worship. He, in turn, will agree on approving these prayers even though they might be not perfect.

According to Nursi, a person's pride proves his or her impotence;<sup>103</sup> furthermore, unbelief degrades human beings to infinitely impotent animals.<sup>104</sup> In the twenty-third Word Nursi compares human beings to animals. Unlike animals, humans have to learn everything from their birth on.<sup>105</sup> As Nursi puts it, animals are sent on earth in a way which shows that they were educated somewhere else. They possess all the abilities they need and do not know anything about the rules of life. At the age of twenty, humans are still are unaware of the challenges and conditions of life and how to deal with it.

Moreover, they have to learn until the end of lifetime. Humans are brought to life in an

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<sup>99</sup> Ibid., 227.

<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 245.

<sup>102</sup> Ibid., 284.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 323.

<sup>104</sup> Ibid.

<sup>105</sup> Ibid., 324.

endlessly impotent and weak state. In Nursi's view, they learn to walk in one or two years. Only in fifteen years can they differentiate harm from benefit. They are in need of others to discern what is harmful or beneficial for them. As a result human beings' duties are the following:

This means that man's innate duty is to be perfected through learning and to proclaim his worship of God and servitude to Him through supplication. That is to say, it is to know the answers of the questions: "Through whose compassion is my life so wisely administered in this way? Through whose generosity am I so kindly raised? Through whose graciousness am I so delicately nurtured and ministered to?" It is to beseech and supplicate the Provider of Needs through the tongue of impotence and poverty; it is to seek from Him. It is to fly to the high station of worship and servitude to God on the wings of impotence and poverty.<sup>106</sup>

Keeping in mind that individuals have to face innumerable enemies and are bound to endless desires and needs, the most significant duty is supplication.<sup>107</sup> Supplication is the foundation of worship, as Nursi explains it. He gives the example of a child, which either cries or asks in order to achieve its desired object.

That is to say, it either prays through the tongue of its impotence or asks for it verbally. Nursi compares humans to this child and believes that they are like sensitive children on this earth. God, the Compassionate, answers to the tears of this child; hence, impotence and weakness are crucial in order to gain a life of fulfillment. If someone claims that everything that he or she received in life as blessing from God was due to his or her own achievement, he or she behaves unjustly to God. Those people deserve to be punished since they deny God's mercy on them and the gifts they received from Him. In Nursi's view, another wisdom behind occasions such as sickness, natural disasters or personal sorrows, which happen by God's will, is to invite believers to feel their impotence and dependence on God.<sup>108</sup> In those situations they reach a deeper understanding of God's nature and His divine names (*asma al-Husna*) such as God the

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<sup>106</sup> Ibid.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.

<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 325.

Most Powerful One (*al-Qadir*). Their relationship to God becomes stronger and believers will be elevated in their spiritual rank. For Nursi, this is the very meaning of supplication. Human beings have the understanding that the main function of supplication is to lift the calamities away, but it is not. It is just the time for prayer and if those calamities are not going away, believers should go on with their prayers since the time for it is not over yet.<sup>109</sup> Thus, special occasions are outer forces and times to remember God and His significance in human life. Humankind realizes its servanthood to God. This implies to do supplication just for God's sake and not to interfere in His competence. Everything should be left to God's wisdom and mercy. He is the one who decides how to solve the issues. For Nursi, everything which rises to God's court is an offer of supplication. All beings in their own glorification, worship and tongue pray to Him. They seek to present and manifest the divine attributes in their lives. Nursi calls his fellows to hold on to supplication which he regards as a key to an infinite strength and to the treasure of mercy.<sup>110</sup> God created individuals as divine mirrors in order to display His beautiful attributes. That is to say, human beings are the only creatures who can comprehend God's infinite mercy and power through their endless impotence and weakness.<sup>111</sup>

From a materialistic point of view and concerning their labor, individuals are weak and impotent animals. In Nursi's opinion, their power is strong only as far as their hands can reach. Individuals even influenced domestic animals with their impotence and weakness and if one compares them with their wild counterparts a significant difference cannot be denied which one can recognize at wild and domestic goats.<sup>112</sup> In regard to the materialistic view human beings are not valuable as opposed to their spiritual capacity. The evidence that humans were created for an everlasting life can be seen in their endless

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 326.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 330.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 333.

spiritual abilities and faculties.<sup>113</sup> They do not fit into this limited earthly life and cannot be satisfied with short worldly pleasures. In comparison with animals they own rich and great faculties which cannot be wasted for this temporary world. Unlike animals, people are not able to experience full pleasure in this life because of those endless capacities. In times of pleasure they think about the end of joy which causes pain. Animals receive pleasures without pain since they do not think of the sorrows of the past or have fears regarding the future.<sup>114</sup>

By evaluating their differences, Nursi wants to make clear that human beings were created for worship and supplication. The very meaning of worship is to display impotence and weakness, comprehend the worship of the rest of creation, give thanks to God and observe and think about God's miracles in this world which are manifested in the creation.<sup>115</sup> As previously mentioned, the universe serves humankind due to its impotence and weakness. The only way to appreciate and express gratitude to this servanthood is to display the impotence and pray to God verbally and physically<sup>116</sup> Nursi thinks that people tend to believe that the result of prayer appears due to their own strength or power. This would be a wrong assumption just the same way a child would think the positive outcome is a result of its strength or power rather than its weakness.<sup>117</sup>

It was impotence which brought the mercy and power of God into action; hence, whenever someone denies God's mercy and wisdom, he or she deserves to be penalized. Consequently, all technological achievements, human advances or progress in civilization which can be seen in human history have been made subject to humans due to their weakness and impotence. They did not advance or progress through personal struggle, combat or conquest. Instead, God inspired them because of their ignorance, poverty and

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 333.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 334.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 337.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

need.<sup>118</sup> The reason why humankind rules over creation as vicegerent of God is His compassion, mercy and wisdom; therefore, the individual should give up selfishness, arrogance and pride. In place of that, he or she should announce his or her impotence in front of the Divine. Impotence, weakness, imperfection and defect are foundations of the human ego (*nafs*).<sup>119</sup> In the same way the different stages of darkness present the various stages of light, human impotence brings God's perfection into appearance.

In the twenty-sixth Word Nursi talks about the ways (*tarikats*) which lead to God Almighty.<sup>120</sup> Most probably he means the Sufi orders. While they were all taken from the Qur'an, some of them are shorter, safer and more general than others. In his view, the way of impotence, poverty, reflection and compassion belongs to those. Nursi himself benefited from them. He regards impotence as a tool to reach God's love. For him, it is as ecstatic love but safer. Poverty as well leads to the divine Name of God, the All-Compassionate. In that context, Nursi refers to the fact that one should show and feel his or her impotence and weakness towards God and not to the people around him.<sup>121</sup> In order to practice this path one should follow the example of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), perform the obligatory practices and stay away from main sins.

Additionally, one should observe the ritual prayers and recite the *tesbihats*, a certain collection of supplications, afterwards. It is important to be aware of the fact that the human ego is only subject to imperfection, impotence and weakness. All goodness, beauty and perfection belong to God and are offered to individuals as divine blessings. He is the source of all good. Therefore, human beings should leave pride and arrogance and offer God praises and thanks. Instead, they should know that their perfection lies in their imperfection and their strength in their impotence.<sup>122</sup> In relation to sufi orders, this

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 368.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 491.

<sup>121</sup> Ibid.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid., 492.

previously described path is open for all people. There are no certain criteria or requirements as in brotherhoods which has to be fulfilled since everyone has impotence in his or her very nature.<sup>123</sup>

While people of a high socio-economic status should consider their virtues as a reason for humility and modesty, they end up oppressing their fellows who are poor and weak. Their impotence resulted in imprisonment and severe disapproval. The privileged do not show them compassion and mercy.<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, Nursi calls the weak and poor not to remain in their impotence if they can find a solution to improving their situation.

In the *Flashes* Nursi divides the forms of worship into positive and negative categories or into visible and invisible forms of worship, so to speak. By the first one he means the usual known prayers and practices. The negative or invisible type of worship is described as follows: Nursi puts sickness, illness and diseases into this division.<sup>125</sup> A person who goes through hardships or sickness turns to God, the Compassionate One and calls Him for help and support. The sick person reflects on and prays to Him. Thus, the believer practices a pure type of worship. As opposed to other rituals, no hypocrisy can influence this kind of negative worship.<sup>126</sup> If the afflicted person responds with patience to the illness, thinks of the reward and is thankful towards God, then each hour will count as an entire day of worship, and the believer's life becomes very long.

According to Nursi, the real tragedy is the one which attacks faith.<sup>127</sup> Anything else besides that should not be considered as misfortune. With respect to that, some of those negative events in life are warnings to human beings from the Divine. God, the Most-Merciful, who wants to save them from wrong actions. Another reason for sending hardships is to remind humans of their weakness and impotence. Some of them can also

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<sup>123</sup> Ibid., 494.

<sup>124</sup> Nursi, *Letters: 1928 – 1932* (Istanbul: Sözler Publications, 2001), 546.

<sup>125</sup> Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı*, vol.1 (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 1996), 581.

<sup>126</sup> Ibid.

<sup>127</sup> Ibid., 582.

be regarded as a way to show repentance for past deeds or as means to awaken people from their state of forgetfulness. Sickness and disease should therefore be seen as special favors from God. He purifies and educates His servants in a special way.

While talking about impotence and weakness, Nursi points out that the impotence and weakness of animals end at a certain time.<sup>130</sup> Their mothers, therefore, do not take care of them after they become able to provide for themselves. Since human beings will be impotent and weak until death their situation is the complete opposite of that of animals. Parents still take care of them to a certain extent. Their state of certain childhood always remains.<sup>131</sup>

As described earlier, the essence of worship and supplication is impotence and weakness. If someone denies this fact, he or she starts to place him – or herself on a high rank in pride and arrogance.<sup>132</sup> Nursi is convinced that nutrition and provision comes according to the degree of impotence and weakness of a person.<sup>133</sup> Enough evidence is shown through people who seem powerless, unintelligent and incapable, but who become rich. Scholars and literary figures instead, become poor because of the greed arising from their intelligence. The more children grow and increase in ability and strength, the harder it becomes for them to receive their provision. Finally it can be said that sustenance stands in relation to the degree of ability and will.<sup>134</sup>

### **The Social Aspect**

The reason why unbelievers and people of misguidance are united and hold to each other is not because of their strength.<sup>135</sup> These people lack inward support unlike the believers and thus rely upon each other. They work together and support each other

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<sup>128</sup> Ibid., 583.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 648.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid.,

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 660.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 664.

because of their impotence and weakness and as a result of not depending on God. The disbelievers are really weak and impotent in every sense since they have no power to depend on. The community of unbelievers, therefore, forms true powerful unions because of their need for union.<sup>136</sup> A believer instead, does not feel a similar desire for unity with others because of his inner strength; hence, controversy, quarrels and disagreements among believers are not the result of weakness and impotence but rather outcomes from the power that arises from the support of perfect faith. Similarly, the union of disbelievers originates from weakness and impotence. Weak and impotent people have to be united; therefore, they do join with each other in a very strong way. Strong people do not really sense this need; hence, their unity is weak. Since lions and foxes, for instance, do not feel the need to unite with each other they live alone. Wild goats instead, always gather together in a flock.<sup>137</sup>

It can be said, that the community of weak is strong unlike the community of the strong people. In this context, Nursi refers to some passages in the Qur'an. The verb "said" in the Quranic verse "*And some women in the city said*"<sup>138</sup> is mentioned in the masculine form although it must be in the feminine version for two reasons: The noun "women" is a feminine noun and also a plural. So-called "broken" plurals in Arabic are always expressed in the feminine form. The other example in the Qur'an describes a community of men: the verb say in "*the Bedouins say*"<sup>139</sup> is in the female version although the Qur'an talks about a community of men. This is a reference that a union of weak, impotent and soft women gains strength and power. The weak become strong like men only through unity. The Qur'an, therefore, makes use of the male form of the verb. Strong men, in contrast to that, believe in their own individual strength and thus remain weak in their association with other men. The use of the feminine verb is logically understandable.

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 665.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Qur'an 12:30

<sup>139</sup> Qur'an 49:14

Consequently, the community of believers mostly relies on their belief in God and does not seek for support and help from others. If they do so, they do not act sincerely. As opposed to them, the people who focus mainly on the world and lose the inward divine support have a high feeling of impotence and weakness.<sup>140</sup> They seek for assistance and help from others and thus can truly unite with others and are able to sacrifice themselves for each other.

Believers do not realize the strength in union and in associating with others. As a natural outcome, they fall into quarrels, disputes and disagreements among each other. Disbelievers achieve their goals while believers end up in failure. The virtue of weakness and impotence should therefore not be underestimated. According to Nursi, the cure and medicine lies in going back to the divine command of unity in order to preserve social life.<sup>141</sup>

The people of truth, as Nursi calls the community of believers, should therefore recognize how harmful disunity and separateness are. Such behavior only supports the work of disbelievers. The individual should join the caravan of the people of truth with his or her entire heart and sacrifice him or herself without any hesitation. They should fully feel their basic weakness and impotence in order to join others.

Nursi mentions another example of weak individuals in the West who gained effective strength and power through union. It is the American Organization for Women's Rights and Liberty.<sup>142</sup> The organization of Armenians can also be considered as evidence for the previously mentioned observation. Despite their weakness and small number, Nursi states, they achieved a high strength through unity. For Nursi, impotence and weakness are the foundations of a pious community.<sup>143</sup> Individuals should involve themselves in social life with these two features. No one should ever think of him or

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<sup>140</sup> Nursi, 665.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid.

<sup>142</sup> Ibid.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 674.

herself as something better than other. Humility and modesty should be the main character traits while realizing that one owns good character traits. One should always keep that in mind while helping others. Nursi says, that his life and path was always characterized by that. He never became proud because of his achievements. If he mentions those it is only in the context of proclaiming God gifts. People of virtue, therefore, can only interfere or intervene in social issues with a sense of impotence, weakness and humility. They do not have permission to use their virtues for oppressing others. Consequently, this would show an absence of virtues.

In Nursi's belief, it was God's grace and mercy which enabled him to work for the Muslim faith and nation.<sup>144</sup> He spent all his life for the benefit and good of the Muslim community knowing that it was God's bounty which gave him the power and knowledge; hence, he refused public attention and applause. Since it is God who blessed him with those virtues he does not deserve to be praised; furthermore, he is completely aware of his impotence and weakness. Instead of asking for a special rank among people he always declares his faults and insignificance. He finds comfort and appeasement in repentance and regretfulness.<sup>145</sup> He put pride and arrogance always aside and asked people for prayers and sought God's forgiveness. Nursi only showed dignity and pride in the moments in which he served the Qur'an and taught the truths of belief. On account of those truths and in order to honor the Qur'an and not to bow in front of the people of misguidance, as Nursi puts it, he temporarily held this dignified position. Neither did he seek a rank superior to Muslims.

In the twenty-fifth Flash, Nursi again refers to the second category of worship, the negative one.<sup>146</sup> This kind of worship through sickness and calamities is full of sincerity since you do not make a show for others. In performing the obligatory prayers, for

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<sup>144</sup> Ibid.

<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 675.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 692.

instance, there might be a danger in seeking admiration from people. The negative kind of worship is free from such risks. Through reflecting on impotence and weakness one gets an awareness of the transitoriness of the body.<sup>147</sup> The believer concentrates on the main focus in life and remembers why he or she is on earth. Individuals rediscover the real Possessor of everything.

As mentioned several times, God created humans in impotence and weakness in order to always leave the door open to His divine court for prayer and a deeper relationship with His servants. The believers, therefore, seek His help and refuge all the time.<sup>148</sup> The wisdom of the creation of human beings has to be regarded in that context. They always pray and submit to God. The Quranic verse of 25:77 is in that sense crucially important: “*Say: ‘Your Sustainer would not concern Himself with you if it was not for your prayers’.*”<sup>149</sup>

Impotence and weakness have also an additional significance for social life. By experiencing their own spiritual and physical poverty people are able to feel true compassion and mercy towards the sick and poor.<sup>150</sup> The respect and kindness towards those afflicted people grow by the means of impotence. If the characteristics of impotence and weakness would not exist people would not get close to each other and would live in self-sufficiency. With respect to that, Nursi points to the Qur’anic verse which indicates that people go astray if they do not feel any need for others: “*Yet, man will, indeed, wax arrogant. For he thinks himself self-sufficient.*”<sup>151</sup> As a result, human beings try to help their fellows or at least ask about their condition.<sup>152</sup> Nursi himself prayed thirty years because of his illness.<sup>153</sup> Although he was cured, he continued with his prayers and

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<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 693.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 695.

<sup>149</sup> Qur’an, 25:77, Yusuf Ali

<sup>150</sup> Nursi, 697.

<sup>151</sup> Qur’an, 96:6-7.

<sup>152</sup> Nursi, 697.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

supplication. He was aware of the fact that this is first of all a call for worship and an exercise for the hereafter. Sickness and disease are a time of prayer. Nevertheless, the prayer of a sick person is full of sincerity since it arises from weakness, impotence and poverty. It is, therefore, certain to be accepted.<sup>154</sup> Neither should sick people grieve about the fact that they might be disabled from doing worship and practice as usual when they are physically strong. Being sick still bears the possibility of practicing sincere worship.

In Nursi's opinion, both the pious sick, and the believers who take care of the sick, should take advantage of this supplication. God reveals His mercy and compassion according to the degree of impotence and weakness a person declares.<sup>155</sup> Nursi is convinced that the time of full impotence and weakness is at old age.<sup>156</sup> One should consider old age as a welcoming opportunity to get closer to God since it can serve as mediator and intercessor. Usually, old age is regarded as something negative but it can function between God and the servant. Nursi explains several times that he was saved from his sorrows at the moment he declared his impotence and weakness in front of the divine court.<sup>157</sup> He refers to the example of young and powerless animals. A young baby bird, for instance, takes advantage of its mother's compassion through impotence. The mother always flies around and brings food.<sup>158</sup> When it grows up, the infant bird becomes strong and gives up its impotence. From that moment on it is responsible for itself. The old people resemble these young creatures in terms of impotence and weakness. This is also very true for infants. God in His mercy sends nutrition for weak infants by means of their impotence through the mother's breast. If elderly people come into the condition of pure weakness and impotence God cares for them the same way. Human beings should not expect to be supported by weak and impotent creatures. While seeking for help and

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<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Ibid., 702.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid., 704.

<sup>157</sup> Ibid., 708.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid., 709.

support in creation one realizes that any other being is as weak as him or herself.<sup>159</sup> It is then that the individual comprehends that only God can help him or her.

As noted earlier, human beings function as divine mirrors who declare God's perfection.<sup>160</sup> Human beings are therefore witnesses of God's power, knowledge and strength. They are equipped with a variety of inner and outer faculties and needs. Only God who is able to rule over everything and satisfy all the needs is the One who can provide for them.<sup>161</sup> For instance, human beings in their impotence long for immortality and eternity. God has the power to create and provide such a place. It is important to mention that God does not want anyone to interfere or intervene while helping and supporting His servants.<sup>162</sup> Nursi feels proud to be a measure or criterion for God's omnipotence. It is enough to be alive just for this and it gives life meaning and value.<sup>163</sup>

Another example of impotence which leads to strength can be seen through plants and trees.<sup>164</sup> They fully trust in and submit to God. Through their impotence and weakness their provision is guaranteed. This supports the idea of receiving nutrition according to the degree of impotence, weakness and trust into God.

In the books of *Rays* Nursi talks about his three personalities which are very different from each other.<sup>165</sup> During the time of worship God gives him a second personality which he describes as full of impotence. He gets an awareness of his faults and seeks refuge at the divine court. This is the basis of worship. Through this personality Nursi believes himself to be more faulty, wretched and powerless than anyone else and no one can make him believe the opposite. If one looks at impotence and weakness through the eyes of an unbeliever he or she tends to find it very distressing and painful.<sup>166</sup> With the eyes of belief

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<sup>159</sup> Ibid., 711.

<sup>160</sup> Ibid., 850.

<sup>161</sup> Ibid., 853.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid., 854.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., 788.

<sup>164</sup> Ibid., 929.

<sup>165</sup> Nursi, *Risale-i Nur Külliyyatı*, vol. 2 (Istanbul: Nesil Publications, 1996), 1060.

<sup>166</sup> Ibid., 1149.

and the wisdom of the Qur'an, instead, the entire world is enlightened. Humans long for eternity and a place of paradise where they can finally fulfil all of their desires. They have endless needs and enemies.<sup>167</sup>

Impotence and weakness are manifest in every creature on earth; from an atom to the planets. Creatures, therefore, are evidence for a Creator through these two characteristics of impotence and weakness.<sup>168</sup> In the same way that hunger and thirst are evidence for water and food so are impotence and weakness proof enough for an omnipotent God who is able to satisfy all the needs. With the light of belief impotence and weakness which degraded humans less strong than animals turn to be means of becoming a vicegerent on earth.<sup>169</sup> Everything becomes obedient to and serves for them. Through the connection to God human beings are immediately linked with His strength and power and thus become representatives.<sup>170</sup> Everything which belongs to God belongs to humans at the same time and they become related to the entire universe. Nursi considers impotence also as treasure. Human beings should not leave anything in their self except impotence, weakness, imperfection and poverty. All praise, beauty and goodness belong to God since he blessed creatures with them;<sup>171</sup> hence, there is no need to become proud.

God gifted him with the *Risale-i Nur* collection because of the fact that the Muslim community was in such a bad manner, weak, impotent and in high need of such work and knowledge. It was God's blessing and mercy upon the Muslims. Ramadan is also a time where one feels impotence and weakness at their peak. The students of Nursi are also convinced that the path of impotence and weakness are the main characteristics of Nursi's profession. He also taught them this way of behavior and attitude which is not to be proud and always to feel their need of God.

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<sup>167</sup> Ibid.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid, 1282.

<sup>169</sup> Ibid., 1285.

<sup>170</sup> Ibid., 1324.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid., 1351.

Said Nursi's examination of human impotence bears significant meaning for the daily life of human beings. Theology should aim to provide guidance on how to deal with human features practically in the personal and social dimension. It should shape people's life positively and give accurate answers to the challenges of life. Hence, Nursi's approach is highly reasonable. From the very beginning on, he explains what kind of relevance physical and spiritual weakness has for human life. Nursi gives much evidence in order to prove that human beings are indeed weak, and spiritually-speaking, poor. He points to the numerous creatures in the universe and the conditions within human being itself. This is appropriate since most people nowadays only believe in matters which they can clearly see and recognize by their own eyes and minds.

In fact, one can divide Nursi's analysis into two parts: Depicting the "is-condition" of human weakness with which it is hard to live and the "transformation" of it into a powerful force by relying upon an Omniscient Creator. This transformation of spiritual poverty has a deep positive impact not only in the personal but also in the social and global dimension of human life. Presently, the negative outcome of the value of individualism leads people often to self-centeredness and mistrust of the other. Individualism in its negative results makes them believe that their entity is not linked to other human beings. From a social perspective, a full awareness of the human feature of impotence would guide them to strong unions. An individual who truly and fully acknowledges his or her weakness would find the inward support by relating to God. The appropriate approach, as Nursi describes it throughout his work, would be as follows: Entering a powerful relationship with God and establishing strong social connections with other weak human beings. This is the proper use of God-given spiritual poverty which leads to a balance in life.

As a matter of fact human beings tend to practice either one or the other. For instance, the often expressed criticism toward Muslim communities in Germany fits into this

picture. Non-Muslims accuse Muslims of not being able to form a powerful representative organization. The reason is obvious. Each group believes in its own righteousness and its strength and hence refuses to join with another. They suppose their inward support, namely their trust in God, is sufficient and there is no need for cooperation with each other. Their dignity as well hinders them to relate to each other. This problematic issue might be certainly true for other countries as well. The right comprehension of human impotence and weakness guides to harmony within individuals, among their families, societies and nations. Each of those would liberate themselves from isolation and selfish behavior by joining each other and sharing their concerns, social or global issues. Nations would cease to think of themselves as a separate entity, build up strong unions and become a global family which could be creative in conflict solutions and peace - making. Believers of all different background and faith traditions would get together.

If people truly comprehend their own nature with all its characteristics this would enable them to receive a full understanding for the rest of humankind.

Nursi describes human beings as the most weak and impotent creatures on earth. They have endless needs and desires. Unlike animals they are not only in need of material but also spiritual desires. It is not only their stomachs which have to be filled but also their infinite feelings, emotions and spiritual desires which need to be satisfied. They are not only bound to a material body. The individual is equipped with spiritual faculties like mind, heart, spirit and soul. They also belong to his or her entity and personality and have to be treated with special care. Due to this extraordinary creation and equipment with spiritual faculties, human beings are able to link with literally every creature in the universe and come into a relationship with beings. While getting in touch with the creation, the individual recognizes the divine attributes and names of the Creator in every single creature. Therefore, he or she has the capacity to become vicegerent on earth and the crown of creation.

According to Nursi, humankind was created with the desire and need to live a life according to its quality of humanness. In their weakness and impotence they look for an order which satisfy their infinite material and spiritual desires. First of all, he or she has to learn the different techniques and arts to provide housing, provision and clothing for themselves. These are only few instances. Consequently, they have to work and cooperate with others since the individual cannot only rely upon the own strength which is limited through infinite weakness and impotence. Injustice, quarrels, disputes which can arise through such relationships need to be solved through justice and order. Therefore, they also seek a power which establishes true and absolute justice and regulations for social life. People as finite, weak and impotent they are, are not fully able to set up true justice. With respect to their spiritual and physical poverty they seek a power which provides such a framework. In order to preserve this law this power has to have sovereignty on every single being. God grants human beings those components and answers in the best way to their expectations. Worship and supplication which are recommended by God to the individual protects the relationship between Him and humans. Humankind is required to hold on worship and supplication in order to keep their establishment. Otherwise, they will fall into real weakness and impotence. Ultimately, impotence has two components. One is the real impotence which someone gets if he or she loses the inward divine support and relation to God. The other one, as shown above, is to use weakness and impotence properly in the divine framework which, therefore, leads to true strength and power. As Nursi describes it throughout his work, impotence and weakness have the capacity to become mediators and intercessors for human beings in front of the Divine.

As a result humankind receives true joy and happiness on this world and the hereafter. A proper use of impotence as a God given characteristic in human nature is the reason why an entrance to eternity is not denied. If fully understood, this human feature can serve human beings in the best way. A person longs for eternity and reunion with the finite

beings which separated themselves from him or her. Weakness and impotence are a hindrance to reach those beloved ones. However, it is also weakness and impotence which have the potential to reunite him or her again with them. The only thing which has to be done is to turn to the omnipotent Creator.

It is not strength, power or the existence of certain abilities within human beings which lead to material provision or technological advancements. Human history is full of those achievements because of the existence of weakness and impotence in their nature. God in His mercy and compassions answered to humanity knowing that alone they would not be able to attain anything. Therefore, as shown earlier, provision as well as wealth and other achievements come according to the degree of weakness and impotence of a person. In that sense, Nursi does not give any credit to human beings in their achievements. It is God who created the causes, the single elements, the abilities of humans, the great bodily functions, mechanisms and organs. He is the one who deserves to be praised.

Human beings in their activities and deeds to obtain those results perform a certain kind of prayer which is the prayer of acting. God in His compassion accepts this activity as a prayer and creates the result. One might think that Nursi is very harsh in that and puts human beings in a very negative state by saying that they are not able to be a source of any good. As a matter of fact, humans as the most intelligent creatures on earth are not even able to control their bodily functions, systems or have any influence on what is going on in the world. The modern humans of today are in their peak of evolution. They can produce and invent all kinds of technological advancement. They can even copy genes and give life to a being. The progress in medicine, physics and other scientific areas prove the climax of humanity's growth. No wonder that people tend to think of themselves as great beings. As a result lots of people become proud and self-centered.

It seems insignificant and small but they rise in their quality through their simple intention and acknowledging of this very impotence. As long as they are able to declare

and admit their impotence they ascend in their humanness and receive a high quality. Therefore, impotence has two components: the use within the divine framework as a pious believer and consequently focusing the impotence on the Divine and the Hereafter. The latter one is to direct impotence to the ego and the finite world. The consequences of both options are clear. The first direction leads to true strength and power since the person comes into a relationship with God. The other one results in true impotence since the inward support which should be found through impotence itself is totally denied; hence, those people who do not acknowledge the existence of an omnipotent God fall into despair and spiritual poverty. They are condemned to seek help in the creation and to rely on finite and transitory beings which cannot respond to the infinite needs and desires of them.

Another impressive concept in Nursi's writing is the understanding of impotence as evidence for an omnipotent God. Human beings are divine mirrors who constantly proclaim the existence of an all-powerful, sovereign and merciful Creator. Looking from a theo-centric perspective, impotence is the tool and measure which displays God's nature. One needs to have the opposite and contrast to God in order to comprehend His infinite goodness and greatness. Thus, the expression of divine mirrors is quite useful.

It is certainly true when Nursi talks about the strong unions of disbelievers as a result of their true impotence and lack of inward support, namely God's support. They have to unite with other weak and impotent creatures in order to achieve strength and power. Believers, instead, cannot form those strong unions since they do not truly feel the need for unity because of their inward support. They consider God as the One who can help them in anything. This misunderstanding leads them to refuse true needed unions with others. Human calamities, natural disasters or negative incidents bring the potential impotence into move and direct the individual towards God. Old age and diseases can also be understood in that context.



## CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

The major difference between Paul Tillich and Said Nursi lies in the interpretation of the Fall. Tillich refers very often to the Genesis story in order to explain how the transition from essence to existence happened. For him, the biblical narration provides the answer of estrangement. It bears universal meaning and affected whole humanity. Adam and Eve's estrangement became also the estrangement of humankind. Therefore, Tillich clarifies terms like original or hereditary sin and comes with a new interpretation of them. Human beings were in a state of dreaming innocence and became estranged through the incident of the Fall. Said Nursi, instead, acknowledges the event but does not regard it as tragic. It did not affect humankind in a negative way. He talks about it as an isolated event in which Adam and Eve made a mistake. At the end they were forgiven. Nevertheless, the event has also a universal meaning for humanity:

The wisdom of it concerns the charging of duties; Adam was sent charged with such a duty that the unfolding of all mankind's spiritual progress and the revealing of all mankind's potentialities and man's essential nature being a comprehensive mirror to all the Divine Names, are the results of it. If Adam had remained in Paradise, his rank would have been fixed like that of the angels; man's potentialities would not have unfolded. In any case, the angels, whose ranks are unchanging, are numerous, and there is no need for man to perform that sort of worship. Indeed, since Divine wisdom required a realm of accountability appropriate to the potentialities of man, who would traverse infinite degrees, he was expelled from Paradise for his well-known sin, sin being the requirement of man's nature and contrary to that of the angels.

The incident was, therefore, necessary to comprehend God's attributes and His divine nature. In his view, Adam's fall was pure mercy and wisdom. There was no need for angel-like beings which already existed. In order to fully comprehend God's nature and His attributes it was necessary to enter into an earthly life. So many attributes and divine Names such as the All-Forgiver, or the Provider or the Healer would be undiscovered and

remained concealed unless humanity was given the opportunity to live as finite beings on earth. Therefore, it is also necessary to look at the biblical account from a divine perspective since God is the center of creation. Sometimes theologians focus too much on the meaning for humankind. It is interesting, therefore, that Tillich looks at the Fall always from a human perspective but does not raise the question of what it means for God. The overall purpose of human life, for Nursi, is to get to know the Creator. How can that take place, he asks, while remaining in Paradise?

Paul Tillich is doubtlessly an existentialist. According to him, “existentialism gives an analysis of what it means to exist.”<sup>172</sup> The main argument in the theory of existentialism is that humankind’s condition is a state of estrangement from its essential nature. Humanity’s state is described by conflict, anxiety and destruction. As an existentialist he examines the human predicament and tries to give answers from the signs in the Christian message. His main argument is that the individual’s existentialist condition is a state of estrangement from his or her essential nature. It can be concluded from this that the state of estrangement and the different manifestations that estrangement can take is a testimonial to spiritual poverty or human impotence, so to speak. Tillich is convinced that Hegel’s idea of essentialism is incorrect since essentialists believe that estrangement can be overcome and human beings can be reconciled with their true being.<sup>173</sup> In that sense, Tillich and Nursi disagree on the question of whether impotence and estrangement will always remain in human life until death. Nursi goes further and believes that there is reconciliation and harmony when impotence is properly used in the divine frame. Impotence can lead to unity and harmony with God, other human beings and the rest of creation. Tillich would disagree with that as one can see in the following statement:

Existence is estrangement and not reconciliation; it is dehumanization and not the expression of essential humanity. It is the process in which man becomes a thing and ceases to be a person. History is not the divine self-manifestation

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<sup>172</sup> Tillich, 25.

<sup>173</sup> Ibid.

but a series of unreconciled conflicts, threatening man with self-destruction. The existence of the individual is filled with anxiety and threatened by meaninglessness.<sup>174</sup>

For Tillich, humanity is in the threat of existence and needs to go a long way to be reconciled: as an individual, in the social sphere and in life in general. Unlike Said Nursi he does not talk about human impotence or poverty as a beginning or God-given feature. It is rather a result of a human's development. That is to say, it is the consequence of an event which has universal character. Nursi, instead, describes impotence as a beginning, a feature which will be always existent and manifest in the very nature of every single human being.

In order to exemplify how the transition from essence into existence began, Tillich uses the Genesis account. Tillich's existential approach serves to explore the classical Christian analysis of human existence as symbolized in the story of the Fall. As a matter of fact it is a very unique and impressive analysis since he uses several biblical accounts to give evidence for human beings' condition of estrangement: the nations' confusion with their languages, the wars among the kings and many other biblical references. The Genesis narration depicts how human beings became aware of their existential estrangement. Finite freedom, which puts this transition into reality, stands in opposition to their essential nature. However, it is interesting that Tillich refers to Jesus as Christ being able to overcome this existential estrangement, although he was also subordinated under these conditions. He regards him as a representative figure by whom the vagueness of existence is clarified. Yet, this seems very paradoxical and Tillich admits that.<sup>175</sup> He considers him as someone who brings the new reality: "Christ is the end of existence lived in estrangement, conflicts and self-destruction, existential distortion, the ambiguities of

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<sup>174</sup> Ibid.

<sup>175</sup> Ibid., 92.

life and human's historical predicament."<sup>176</sup> He contends that the incident of the cross represents the ambiguities of life and that the symbol of the resurrection shows the victory over estrangement. Yet, why is it that people still feel "estranged" in this world after Jesus' suffering, sacrifice and resurrection? Why then, are matters of conflicts in the personal and social dimension of human life still existent? From a Muslim perspective, Tillich's soteriology seems somehow unclear and does not provide enough satisfying answers. His way of illustrating the human predicament, on the other hand, is very reasonable. He is excellent while he is pointing out the way how human beings fell into the state of estrangement which led overall to their spiritual poverty. His method of reinterpreting biblical symbols is highly needed for the modern age.

Nevertheless, his theology seems to talk to a certain group of people, namely theologians. It is challenging and hard to comprehend him as a non-theologian for he speaks in a very philosophical way. Speaking from a Muslim view, theology should talk to the masses which consist of people who do not study theology. Otherwise, what is the meaning of theology if only few people have access to and understanding for it?

Nursi instead tries to address the masses and one can easily find people from all different backgrounds and generations in the Risale-i Nur study circles which are held regularly at homes: children, youth, adults, educated and uneducated people, women and men have an understanding for Nursi's theology through informal learning. This itself is a unique phenomenon and needs to be more researched. Christian attendees are struck by the fact that all three generations are present at the International Symposiums on Nursi which are organized continuously.

Tillich and Nursi agree on the fact that human beings lack perfection. Their reasoning is different though. While Tillich refers to Jesus Christ as the symbol of overcoming of estrangement, reuniting humanity again with God and bringing them to their essential

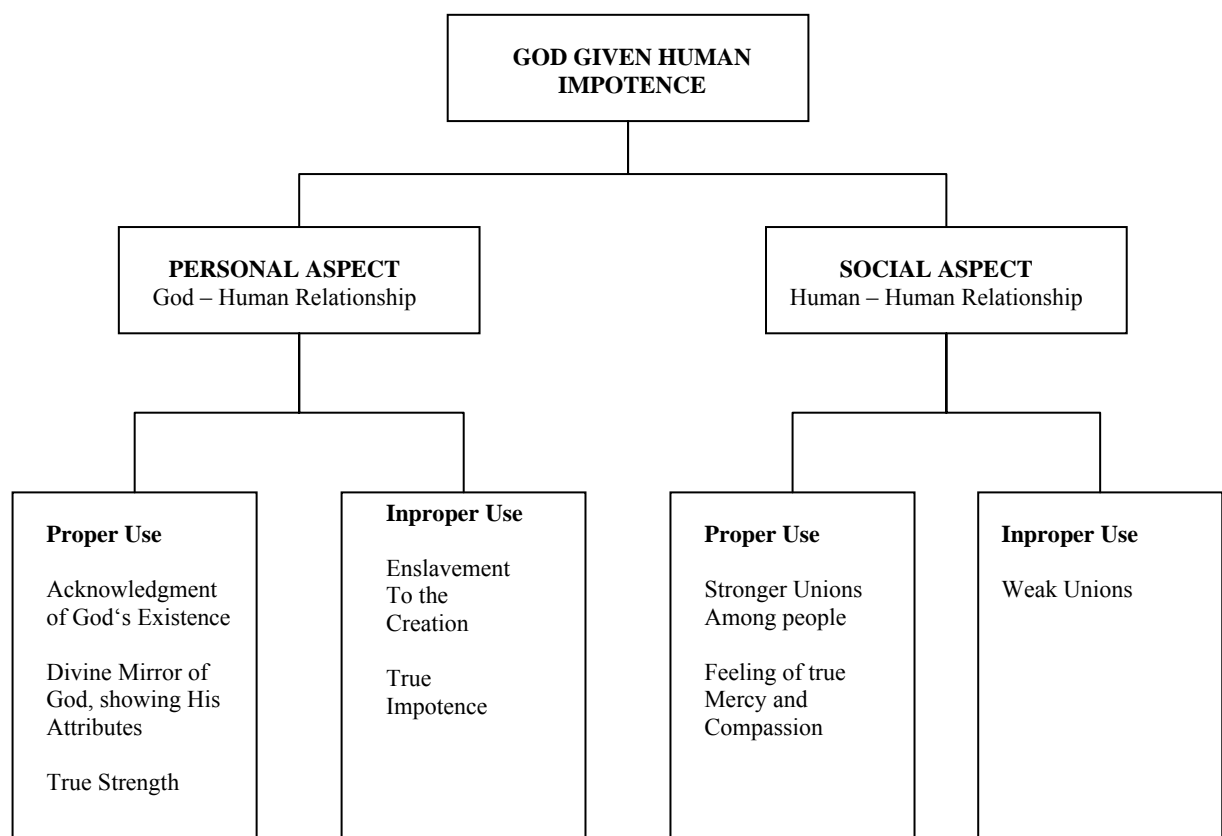
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<sup>176</sup> Ibid., 118-20.

nature, Nursi accepts human impotence as a feature which will remain until the end of time. It is a special tool and has certain functions which he explains in detail.

## APPENDIX

The following graphical description exemplifies in general Said Nursi's concept of God-given human impotence. It also depicts the positive and negative consequences in the individual's personal and social life. They result from a proper or inappropriate use of this human characteristic. The illustration shows what kinds of benefits are granted to a pious person after using human impotence within the divine frame:



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